

A robust quality management process should actively identify and address hidden issues to prevent crises.

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The drunk and the ugly

Quality management involves problem-solving. This is akin to the problems tackled by the fire departments in our cities.

A couple of decades ago, a premier hotel in South Mumbai caught fire. It was the early hours of the morning on a Sunday. So thankfully there was negligible activity in the hotel and minimal traffic in the vicinity. The fire started in the basement, and before one knew it, it spread wild, burning the

merchandise of shopkeepers in the basement, and the carpets and drapes that adorned the majestic hotel lobby.

Loud fire engine sirens woke up the neighbourhood. The firefighters had one mission: put the fire out! This was accomplished with great efficiency and no loss of life although some occupants of the hotel had to be rushed to the hospital because they sustained minor injuries. The firefighters evacuated the occupants of the tower and shifted them to a safe haven. Three hours later they cordoned the hotel and left with blaring sirens.

Firefighters solve sporadic problems. The parallel in industry is quality control engineers. Fire preventers solve chronic problems. The parallel in industry is quality improvement engineers.

The next day, a fresh team arrived from the fire department to go through the ashes to ascertain the root cause of the fire. These persons were from the fire prevention cell. They had a different set of skills. After much patient investigation they realised that a short circuit had caused the fire and that carpets and drapes had multiplied the impact.

The remedial actions involved re-wiring the hotel and incorporating many more safety measures. Included in the latter was a ban on inflammable fabrics and materials. The new-look hotel adopted a granite and glass theme which was elegant.

So what?

Firefighters solve sporadic problems. The parallel in industry is quality control engineers.

Fire preventers solve chronic problems. The parallel in industry is quality improvement engineers.

In conclusion, I wish to share a Juran lesson on the distinction between chronic defects and sporadic defects. The distinction is clear from the exchange between the drunk and the ugly at a party:

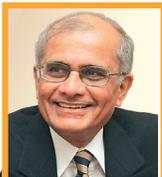
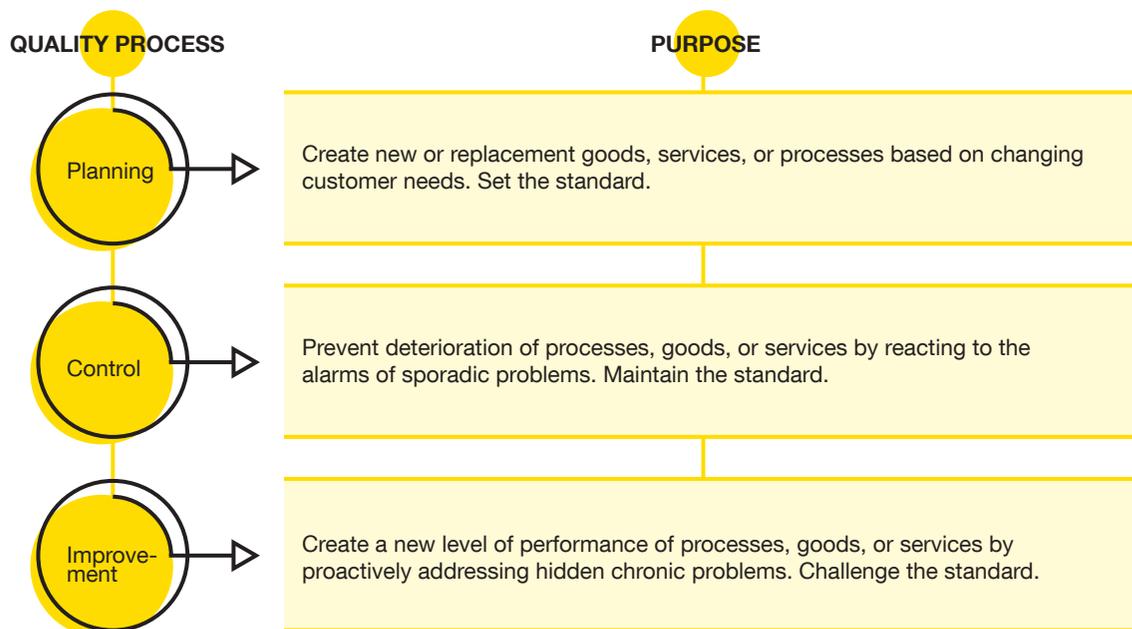
The Ugly: "Sir, you are drunk, and what is more you are disgustingly drunk."

The Drunk: "My dear, you are ugly, and what is more, you are disgustingly ugly. But tomorrow I shall be sober and you will still be disgustingly ugly."

Lessons Learned

- Quality control is about corrective actions we take when sporadic fires break out
- Quality improvement is about reducing chronic high costs and poor quality
- Quality improvements are breakthroughs to unprecedented levels of performance
- Breakthrough is the organised creation of beneficial change
- Quality control requires reactive skills
- Quality improvement requires proactive skills 

SELECTING THE CORRECT PROCESS



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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